THE CAREER OFFICER ATTRITION DILEMMA: AN UNDERLYING CAUSE

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL CHRIS A. LAMSON
United States Marine Corps

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Lieutenant Colonel Chris A. Lamson
Unite States Marine Corps

Dr. Lenny Wong
Project Advisor

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or any of its agencies.

U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

ABSTRACT

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Junior and mid-grade officer attrition is a serious problem for the Services. They are leaving active duty because they are frustrated with the system. This system encompasses everything from pay, operational tempo, housing, and the perceived quality and credibility of their leaders. Although studies have been completed in these areas, most attribute career officer attrition to substandard tangible benefits such as low pay, poor housing, or too much time spent away from home. The author believes that these are not the root problem. There is another, underlying cause to career officer attrition. The military, like all organizations, is made up of individuals from across the existing generational cohorts. There is evidence to suggest that multiple generations in the workforce cause severe friction and frustration among the personnel. This individual frustration can be severe enough to cause heavier than normal attrition. In this paper, the author will not only tie generational conflict to attrition, but, will also tie this conflict to senior leaders' loss of credibility with their subordinates. If the Services are to minimize officer attrition, they must first begin to understand the impact of the multigenerational workforce on both the organization and the individuals within the organization.

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> There is a problem in the workplace—a problem derived not from downsizing, rightsizing, change, technology, foreign competition, pointy-haired bosses, bad breath, cubicle envy, or greed. It is a problem of values, ambitions, views, and mind-sets, demographics, and generations in conflict.
>
> —Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak

Career level attrition typically has not been a problem for the military Services. The reverse was actually a larger problem. From the late 1980s through the early and mid 1990s, downsizing was the major personnel issue for the Services. Senior leadership has never had to deal with the career level attrition problem that the Services have seen over the last 5-7 years. Entry level and non-EAS (End of Active Service. A term used by the Marine Corps to describe the end of a service person's initial contractual obligation) attrition has been an issue for decades. There are literally hundreds of studies on entry level and non-EAS attrition. Career attrition, however, is a relatively new phenomenon and there are relatively few studies in this area.

Although the Services conduct exit surveys in an attempt to determine why individuals leave military service prior to retirement, these surveys are only identify the symptoms, or the easily definable problems, which are perceived as the root problem. Most surveys cite personnel tempo (perstempo), compensation, and other quality of life issues as reasons for departing active duty. These answers are too easy. Deployments have always been a way of life in the military and compensation has always been lower than civilian counterpart. In fact, pay and other compensation is at an all time high. So, if these are not the root problems causing career attrition, then what are they and why haven't they surfaced on the exit surveys?

Before continuing it is important to have a clear frame of reference on what exactly career attrition is and is not. Career attrition applies to any active duty service person that stays beyond his or her initial obligation, but voluntarily leaves the service prior to becoming eligible for retirement. It is not someone who retires after successfully completing the congressionally mandated time of service, nor is it someone who fails to complete his/her initial term of enlistment. This paper specifically targets that segment of the active duty military population that at one time wanted to stay in, and for various reasons, has subsequently decided to leave active duty.

These issues are the result of friction caused by the multigenerational workforce. The quote above lies more at the root of the problem than any quality of life issue. Zemke, et el, goes on to say that "At no previous time in our history have so many and such different

generations with such diversity been asked to work together shoulder to shoulder, side by side, cubicle to cubicle."[1] The generational conflict coupled with other external pressures, is also causing the military organization and culture to change. This change is a very gradual transformation from an institutional organization to an occupational organization.[2] This transformation also has the potential to adversely impact career attrition if it is not understood and addressed.

It is also important for the reader to understand that there is more to the attrition dilemma than pay, perstempo, or housing. This is far too simple and could be easily fixed. Just ask them why they are leaving, fix it, and they will stay. This is proving to be harder than expected. There is a more fundamental problem causing attrition. Attrition is the delta between the application of the senior leadership vision and the expectations of their subordinates. The wider the delta the greater the lack of credibility held by Xers for the Boomer leadership. It is this lack of credibility that causes attrition. The greater the lack of credibility, the higher the attrition. This delta is caused by:

- Lack of senior leadership understanding of subordinates.
- Senior leadership attitudes towards subordinates.
- The perception of the subordinates that the senior leadership does not understand them and does not care to understand them.

The attrition dilemma is not a mathematical problem that has one right answer. Nor is it a piece of equipment that has broken down that only requires one part to be fixed. The attrition dilemma is deeply rooted in the human dimensions of interpersonal skills, organizational behavior, and generational peer types. Specifically, the senior leadership has lost credibility with their subordinates and this has been a leading cause of attrition among junior and mid-grade officers. This loss of credibility is a direct result of the generational differences within the officer corps. To help explain this, this paper will provide some background on generational peer types, their impact on the workforce, put the Military Climate/Culture Survey conducted by The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in a generational perspective, and lastly, provide recommendations on how the senior leadership can regain their credibility.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

A recent study on military culture by the CSIS speaks at length about the negative impacts on military culture brought about by the social environment of the country. In fact, they dedicate an entire chapter to "Environmental Change and Cultural Effect."[3] Although the study makes no specific mention of generational conflicts, all of the environmental changes and cultural effects

they do discuss impact the generations differently. The study recognizes these "cultural effects" as having a highly significant impact on military culture. This chapter begins with

> The research and surveys conducted as part of this study reveal that many areas of the U.S. military are undergoing profound changes that are dramatically affecting organizational climates and may, in the long run, significantly erode the underlying military culture.

Also, the Strategic Leadership Primer, published by the United States Army War College, dedicates an entire chapter to culture.[4] The Army War College defines culture as "...the set of institutional, stated, and operating values, beliefs, and *assumptions* that people have about their organization that are validated by experiences over time."[5] [emphasis added] The important word in this definition is assumption. Assumptions are not necessarily based in fact; they are personal beliefs. And these assumptions not only differ between individuals, but they also differ

USMC ACTIVE DUTY OFFICERS BY GENERATION

Source: USMC Active Duty Personnel Transaction File, Defense Manpower Data Center (November 2001)

TABLE 1: OFFICERS BY GENERATION
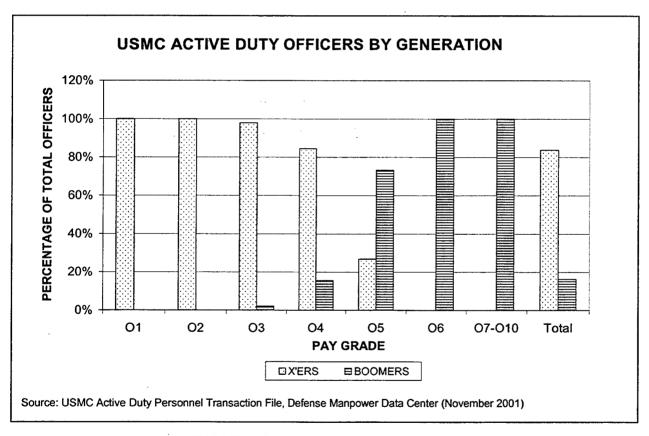
between generational cohorts. Therefore, it is important to understand what assumptions each generational cohort might make about a given situation. As the numbers indicate in Table 1, the Xers make up the preponderance of the Marine Corps officer corps. Eighty four percent of the total officer strength in the Marine Corps is Xers, only sixteen percent are Boomers.[6] Although

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percentages may vary slightly, the same is also true with the Army's officer corps.[7] With such a large percentage of Xers making up the rank and file of the services, it is imperative for senior leaders to understand the generational effects on attrition.

Not only are there more Xers on active duty than Boomers, Xer officers also have higher attrition levels than the Boomers did at the same years in service. For instance, Boomer officers from year group 1983 had lost 13.7% of their group by the time they had five years commissioned service. Xer officers from the same year group had lost 36.6% by the same

USMC OFFICER ATTRITION AT 8 YRS COMMISSIONED SERVICE
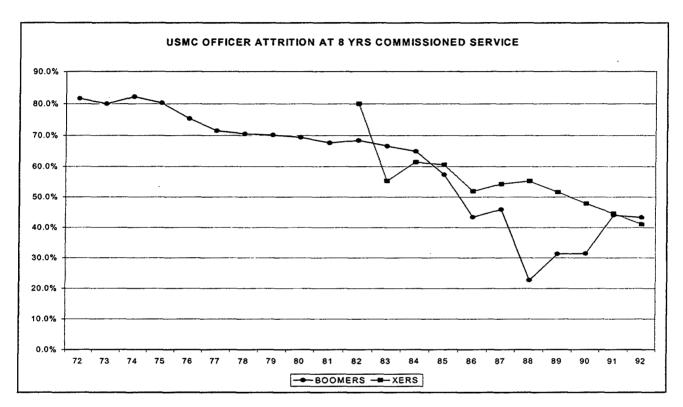
TABLE 2: USMC OFFICER ATTRITION

time.[8] This trend covers most of the years from 1982 through 1995 that Boomers and Xers had the same number of years commissioned service. Table 2 is representative of attrition rates between Boomers and Xers.[9] This table shows the attrition rate for officers after eight years commission service. Each year across the X-axis represents the percentage of officers that left active duty from that year group by the time their year group had eight years of commissioned service. For instance, the 1987 Boomer year group had lost 45.9% of the officers by 1995. Over 54% of Xer officers from the same year group had left active duty by the same time.

Undoubtedly, there are many causes of career attrition and there are no easy answers to this problem. However, if the senior military leadership is to truly understand this dilemma, they cannot ignore the negative impact of the current generational conflict between the Boomers and

Xers. If generational conflicts are not put into the equation of probable causes of attrition, then the attrition dilemma will never be fully understood, nor, will it ever be solved.

GENERATIONS, AN OVERVIEW

There have been eighteen different generations since America was discovered. Table 3 depicts these generations, their birth years, and a sample member from the generation.[10] Of those, five (G.I., Silent, Boomer, 13er, and Millennials) are still living. For the purposes of this paper, the three generations in the Millennial Cycle (Boom, Thirteenth, and Millennial) will be discussed. The military is comprised of people predominately from the Boom and Thirteenth generations.

It is important at this point to come to a consensus on the names

GENERATION	BIRTHYEARS	SAMPLE MEMBER
Puritan	1584-1614	John Winthrop
Cavalier	1615-1647	Nathaniel Bacon
Glorious	1648-1673	Cotton Mather
Enlightenment	1674-1700	William Shirley
Awakening	1701-1723	Benjamin Franklin
Liberty	1724-1741	George Washington
Republican	1742-1766	Thomas Jefferson
Compromise	1767-1791	
Transcendental	1792-1821	Abraham Lincoln
Gilded	1822-1842	Ulysses Grant
Progressive	1843-1859	Theodore Roosevelt
Missionary	1860-1882	Franklin Roosevelt
Lost	1883-1900	Dwight Eisenhower
G.I.	1901-1924	John Kennedy
Silent	1925-1942	Walter Mondale
Boom	1943-1960	Newt Gingrich
Thirteenth	1961-1981	Tom Cruise
Millennial	1982-	Jessica McClure

Source: Howe & Strauss, GENERATIONS: The History of America's Future 1584 to 2069

TABLE 3: GENERATIONAL COHORTS

of these generations. Different authors use different, though similar names. Boom or Boomer is consistent among researchers. However, the Thirteenth generation is also referred to as the 13ers, Generation X, or Xers. Lastly, the Millennials are also referred to as Nexters or Generation Y. For the rest of this paper they will be called Boomers, Xers, and Millennials. Although the Millennials have not begun to enter the officer corps, they will in another one to two years. Therefore it is important to include them in this paper.

BOOMERS

Born 1943 to 1960, this is the generation that currently leads the military. Except for a very few born in 1942, almost all officers in the pay grades 0-5 and higher are Boomers. Also, almost all enlisted in the pay grades E-8 and E-9 are Boomers. Boomers were born after World War II (WWII), an era of hope. The parents of the early Boomers witnessed the Great Depression and WWII. The future looked exceedingly bright to their parents. During the Boomers' early years (age 0-21), science made great advances in health care.[11] The polio and

diphtheria vaccine were developed, the fluoridation of drinking water became common, and Dr. Spock published his first book on child rearing.[12] This generation would be the most protected generation of children in history. According to Neil Howe and William Strauss, "No generation of kids ever got more shots or had more operations ..."[13]

Although great advances were being made in medicine, which caused the death rates from natural causes to decrease, death rates from accidental causes were on a steep increase. Suicides and illegitimate births doubled or tripled.[14] Crime rates also continued to rise throughout the Boomer birth years. According to Howe and Strauss:

> During the 1970s, the incidence of serious youth crime grew twice as fast as the number of youths. Criminals born in 1958, moreover, were 80 percent more likely than criminals born in 1945 to commit multiple crimes—and 80 percent more likely to send their victims to the hospital or morgue.[15]

By the time the Boomers began entering their early twenties, around 1965, the United States had become more engaged in Viet Nam and suffered from severe racial tensions. Activist groups and violent protests on college campuses also increased. A 1970 Gallup Pole found that 44% of all college students believed that violence was justified to bring about social change.[16] The numerous antigovernment rallies were a sign of the times.

Howe and Strauss also suggest that evading military service became more of a generational bond than service in the war itself.[17] Only one in sixteen Boomers saw combat, and two thirds of the rest attribute deliberate avoidance for not serving. Also during this same period, the United States saw its worse period of race riots across the country. In 1967, the country saw riots in over 100 cities. The Viet Nam War and racial violence were major defining moments for the Boomer generation.

Boomers learned from this that the Government (made up of the older G.I. Generation) was severely mismanaging the country. An interesting footnote to this period is that today, one in four Boomers consider Viet Nam to have been a "noble cause."[18] This is the highest proportion for any generation. And, during Desert Shield, Boomers were more inclined than any other generation to believe the United States should send American troops.[19]

BOOMERS AT WORK

> Many Boomer managers ... are in need of development in order to become the leader with the style to which they aspire. Many who are lacking these skills are not even aware of their ineffectiveness.

> —Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak

As Boomers began entering the work force, they attacked it with a vengeance. The Boomers did not have the opportunity to become proud soldiers like their fathers. Viet Nam prevented that from happening. Their fathers received a hero's welcome when they returned from WWII and Korea. The response was much different for the Boomers upon their return from Viet Nam. To prove themselves, the Boomers had to win victory on the job.

Boomers have tended to define themselves through jobs and they define their self-worth by the level of success on the job. According to some researchers, "work ethic" and "worth ethic" are synonymous for Boomers.[20] Boomers tend to be political, on and off the job. They have looked out for themselves since they became teenagers. Because of Viet Nam and racial violence, they learned that if they were to succeed, they would have to work hard for it. Most Boomers learned the fight or flight rule of conflict resolution.[21] There was no gray area, and they have carried this trait with them throughout their careers.

Midway through their careers, however, the work environment started to

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What Other Generations Say About Boomers

Xers
"They're self-righteous"
"They're workaholics"
"They're too political"
"They talk the talk, but don't walk the walk"
"Lighten up, it's only a job"

Nexters
"They're cool"
"They work too much"

Source: Zempke, et al, GENERATIONS AT WORK, 89

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change. Instead of fighting it out in the boardroom until there was a winner, companies started to implement policies that required softer techniques towards conflict resolution.[22] This new way of dealing with conflict was very difficult for the Boomers to grasp. It caused many Boomers, unable to deal with conflict, to suffer increased rates of ulcers, high blood pressure, tension headaches, and other stress related illnesses.

As Boomers begin to reach and exceed 50 years old, their attitude toward work changes. This may, in fact, be good for the military. Their typical workaholic nature is starting to change. They are beginning to reevaluate what is important in their lives and work is falling on their list of priorities.[23] This is a very important development in the work environment, since Xers do not have a very favorable view of Boomers.

XERS

So, if the Boomers are the current senior officers, what generational cohort makes up the bulk of the junior and mid-grade officers? The Xers! The Xers, born between 1961 and 1981, came along just as birth control pills and abortion became legal. Considered the "Bad

Generation," they are, according to Howe and Strauss, "...the only generation since the Civil War unlikely to match their parents' economic fortunes; and the only one born this century to grow up personifying (to others) not the advance, but the decline of their society's greatness."[24]

Xers continued the downward trend in academics and the upward trend in crime that the Boomers started. In 1979, they established the all time low SAT scores and record high drug and crime rates.[25] With record high divorce rates among their parents, the term "Latchkey" was coined to define young children coming home from school with no parents waiting for them.[26] It is the first generation in which individuals have a greater chance to be in poverty if they were young, instead of old. Social security benefits were up 80 percent for retired people from 1969 to 1993. However, benefits for families with children living in poverty were down 10 percent for the same time period.[27]

According to a national commission on children: "Never before has one generation of American teenagers been less healthy, less cared for, or less prepared for life than their parents were at the same age."[28] This generation has also seen a sharp rise in what is referred to a "self inflicted" risks; things such as AIDS, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, and homicides. By definition, these are things that "good" kids do not do.[29] This was a generation that also saw a sharp decline in family values. After rising sharply through the sixties and early seventies, abortion climbed 80 percent from 1973 to 1979. Literally one fetus in three were aborted during the latter years of this generation.[30] It was these negative trends that caused Xers, as a group, to grow up felling unwanted.

XERS AT WORK

> If you're searching for the Generation X work ethic, don't look through the traditional lens. You won't find it. If you want to tap into it, give them a lot to do and some freedom regarding how the work gets done. You'll probably be surprised how much these "slackers" can accomplish and still walk out the door at 5:00 P.M.

> — Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak

The quote above is one of the biggest problems between the Boomers and Xers. The Boomers not only believed in working long hours, but they lived for it. Work was their life. Xers do not understand this. They have a more nontraditional approach to time and work. Xers work to get the job done. When it is done, they go home. They judge their success on whether or not the job was completed satisfactorily, not by how long they can stay at work. Boomers have a definite problem with this. Boomers believe if it took them eighteen hours to complete a job,

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then it must take Xers at least the same amount of time, if not longer. Boomers tend to forget that Xers are more technically savvy than they are.

Xers started entering the job market just as the large corporations started their downsizing. Xers learned early on to always be on the look out for a better opportunity, because they never knew when the current job would be downsized. Xers are the first generation more likely to hold several entry-level positions prior to sticking with one job.[31] Because of this tendency to change jobs, Boomers began to see the Xers as slackers and lacking in loyalty. According to Zemke, et al, this also has caused the Xers to look at work as just a job.[32] Xers are not necessarily disloyal, but it is easier for them to leave one company for another, if their current employer is not meeting their needs, both personally and professionally.

What Other Generations Say About Xers

Boomers
"They're slackers"
"They're rude and lack social skills"
"They always do things their own way, instead of the right way (our way)"

Nexters
"Cheer up"

Source: Zempke, et el, Generations At Work, 116

Studies have shown that Xers are ideally suited for multitasking.[33] This is another issue that causes problems at work. Growing up with video games, the Xers are quite comfortable talking to someone and playing a game at the same time. This is something that Boomers do not understand. Boomers take this as disrespectful. Boomers expect subordinates to sit still and listen with their eyes fixated on them. This actually makes it harder for Xers to concentrate. They do best when their brains are processing multiple things at once. This is a trend that carries into the Millennials.

Xers expect their bosses to be honest about the job. Do not represent a task as important if in reality it is not. They understand that not every task has high value and they expect their bosses to know the same. Although they can, and do, work in teams, they are individualist. They participate in individual sports, but do so in groups. For instance, look at the rise of extreme sports. Primarily made up of individual type sports such as snowboarding, skateboarding, extreme bicycling, and roller-blading, but usually done in groups and they like to pick their own groups.[34] And, although they like technology, they do not like to be micromanaged. Here, again, is where Boomers and Xers tend to have problems. Technology has created management tools that Boomers are using to over-supervise. As noted in the CSIS Military Culture/Climate Survey (MCCS), senior officers are using new technology as tools for "intrusive supervision."[35]

The MCCS study also noted the tendency of senior officers to create a "zero-defects" atmosphere in their organizations. Their desire to look good to their bosses leads to risk aversion and causes them to "over-supervise" their subordinates in an attempt to minimize mistakes.[36] Xers do not understand this. Xers are risk takers and have a definite aversion to being micromanaged.[37]

MILLENNIALS

The Millennials, born during and after 1982, have not started joining the officer ranks yet. Their first high school graduation class was the class of 2000. Those that went to college are now in their second year. If the Xers are pessimistic individualists that dislike their Boomer bosses, what can the senior leadership expect from Millennials? Howe and Strauss believe:

> **What Other Generations Say About Nexers**
>
> Boomers
> "They need more discipline"
> "They need to learn to entertain themselves, they need too much attention"
>
> Xers
> "Here we go again, another self-absorbed generation of spoiled brats"
>
> Source: Zempke, et el, GENERATIONS AT WORK, 137

> As a group, Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse. More important, they are beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including a new focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty, and good conduct.[38]

Unlike the Xers, whose parents went to great lengths not to have children, parents of Millennials have gone to great lengths *to have* children. To the parents of Xers, planned parenthood meant contraceptives or abortions. To the parents of Millennials, planned parenthood required fertility drugs.[39] Unlike the Xers, Millennial babies were wanted. These are children and young adults that are extremely positive about the world around them. They actually look up to their parents and half of the Millennials surveyed believe that lack of parental discipline is a major social problem.[40] They like rules and tend to obey them. Unsupervised time for children has been reduced by 37 percent and aptitude test scores are up for all ethnic and racial groups.[41]

Table 4 lists what Howe and Strauss have defined as the seven distinct traits that the Millennials possess.[42] These are traits that were not seen in the Xers. Until recently, the Millennials had good reason to feel positive about everything around them. As far back as they

can remember, the Dow Jones only went up, people only got wealthier, and America only fought effortless wars.[43] A 1998 National Youth Survey revealed that teenagers listed selfishness, lack of respect for law and authority, wrongdoing by politicians, and lack of parental discipline the four possible causes of problems in the United States.[44]

According to Zemke, et al, this is the first generation of children to grow up not expecting a strong nuclear family. In 1990, only 50 percent of families had a father living at home. This is down from 80 percent in 1970. By 2010, less than 30 percent of children will live in homes with two parents. Also, where Xers complained about both parents working, Millennials consider it normal. More than half of the Millennial Moms work away from the home.[45] Because they do not have the traditional family to make them feel safe, the Millennials reach out to extended family, friends, and neighbors to create that environment. While they do not have the typical family structure that some Xers and most Boomers had, they still think that their parents are "cool."[46] Millennials actually identify with their parents, enjoying time spent together.

The Millennials are a highly confident group. Studies have shown that nearly 90 percent feel positive about

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MILLENNIAL TRAITS

1. Special: Older generations have inculcated in Millennials the sense that they are, collectively, vital to the nation and to their parents'sense of purpose.
2. Sheltered: Millennials are the focus of the most sweeping yourth safety movement in American history.
3. Confident: Millennials are beginning to equate good news for themselves with good news for their country.
4. Team-Oriented: Millennials are developing strong team instincts and tight peer bonds.
5. Achieving: Millennials are on track to become the best-educated and best-behaved adults in the nation's history.
6. Pressured: Millennials feel a "trophy kid" pressure to excel.
7. Conventional: ...more comfortable with their parents' values than any other generation in living memory, Millennials support convention— the idea that social rules can help.

Source: Howe & Strauss, Millennials Rising, 43-44

TABLE 4: MILLENNIAL TRAITS

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themselves. In a 1994 study, 68 percent of Xers 13-15 year olds and 72 percent of Xers 16-17 year olds said that it was hard growing up. That had plummeted to 40 and 47 percent of Millennials teenagers respectively. 77 percent say they are "very" or "somewhat confident" about the future and only 4 percent are pessimistic.[47] This is a generation that literally believes that they can, and will, accomplish anything they choose.

This generation of kids has several significant demographic changes from previous generations. They have older parents. On average the mother at the time of birth is 27, an all-time high in the U.S.; and older birth parents are associated with better child behavior and

achievement. They are being born into smaller families. This means more parental time for each child. More Millennials are the first-born or an only child. This is also associated with higher achievement, closer ties to parents, and aversion to risk. Kids today have more educated parents. One in four has at least one parent with a college education. And finally, the divorce rate is slowing down.[48] All of these traits work to develop a very self-confident generation.

MILLENNIALS AT WORK

> Whereas Generation Xers don't want to work more than forty hours a week, seeing no real point in it, Nexters [Millennials] expect to work more than forty hours a week to achieve the lifestyle they want. They believe—imagine this—that hard work and goal setting are sure tickets to achieving their dreams.

> — Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak

This is a generation more concerned about service than prestige. They list education, medicine, computer related fields, law, and psychology as their most likely career choices. Only one-third say salary is important and only one-fourth believes job prestige is important.[49] To some researchers, the Millennials are expected to be the "ideal workforce."[50] Although Xers did not understand the need, nor did they want to work more than 40 hours a week, Millennials expect to work more than 40 hours a week to attain the lifestyle they desire. They believe that hard work and goal setting is essential to achieving their dreams. A recent study found that 88 percent had specific goals set for the next five years and they expected to achieve them.[51]

Being strong team players, it is expected that they will put the success of the group ahead of their personal pleasure. The Millennials will probably be the best-educated generation ever. It is expected that they will want to continue their education well into adulthood. It has been suggested, however, that their strong inclination towards teamwork might be overshadowed by their need for more supervision and structure than their Xer predecessors. This could get very confusing to Boomer managers and leaders. Just as Boomers are starting to get used to the hands-off leadership style that the Xers demand, the Millennials show up requesting hands-on leadership. Not only will the Boomers become confused, but as the Xers move into the senior leadership positions they too, will have trouble understanding the Millennials need for more supervision. Xers dislike close supervision and will probably have trouble providing the Millennials the close supervision that they desire.

LEADING MIXED GENERATIONS

Military leaders tend to have a straight forward, dictatorial leadership style. Leaders *tell* their subordinates what to do and, although most leaders will deny it, they also dictate *how* to do it. Since lives will depend on it being done correctly, some will say that it has to be done this way. This is true in war and some training situations. However, during the day to day routine, it definitely is not the case. Junior leaders leave active duty because they are frustrated with the system. Call it pay inequities, perstempo, or inadequate housing, bottom line is that they do not believe that they are being treated fairly. And, to a large degree, they believe that they are being micromanaged, which goes against everything that they were promised when the joined. The Marine Corps uses recruiting literature that emphasizes leaders that think. However, the zero-defect mentality that has developed is sending mixed signals to the junior leaders once they get through entry-level training and get into an operational unit.

Zemke, et al, along with numerous other business and leadership authorities, stress that "aggressive communication" is critical in diverse work environments. They go on to say:

> In *aggressive communication*, generational conflicts and potential conflicts are anticipated and surfaced. Generational differences are based primarily on unarticulated assumptions and unconscious criteria; therefore, surfacing them takes a giant step toward resolving them.[52]

Briefs presented by senior military leaders relating their experiences on joint staffs echo this. Although they did not talk about the generation gap between the junior and senior leaders, they did talk at length about the gap that exists between the services and other countries when they were part of a combined staff.[53] The gap is between the services and other countries because of the differences in cultures. People in each service have had different experiences in their career paths. Everything from entry-level training to operational experience differs between the services. Yet it is exactly these experiences that create the service culture. According to the CSIS study on military culture:

> ...Military culture is essentially how things are done in a military organization. It consists of the accepted values, philosophies, tradition, and customs that are passed along to each successive generation of service members to create a shared professional ethos.[54]

The problem faced by senior leaders on joint and combined staffs is similar to the problems that service leaders face in their respective Services. There are three very separate and distinct groups working within their organizations. Each has had different experiences growing up; therefore, they each have their own culture. Howe and Strauss call it a "generational persona." "It is a distinctly human, and variable, creation embodying attitudes

about family life, gender roles, institutions, politics, religion, culture, lifestyle, and the future."[55]
This generational persona is developed in a generation by defining moments.[56] December 7,
1941 was a defining moment for the G.I. and Silent generations. The G.I. generation fought the
war, while the Silent watched it as children and young adults. The Kennedy and King
assassinations and the moon landing in the 1960s were defining moments for the Boomers.
The oil embargo, Nixon's resignation and the fall of the Berlin Wall all impacted the Xers. And
for the Millennials, it was Desert Storm, the Oklahoma City bombing and, most recently, the
terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Defining moments are events that capture the attention
and emotions of millions of people at a formative stage in their lives. These types of events
shape and define a culture just as being trained by the different services will.

THE ACORN IMPERATIVES

So, how is such a diverse workforce managed and led? Zemke, et al, has developed
what they call "The ACORN Imperatives."[57] Based on their studies, these are five common
traits in companies that have been successful in developing highly integrated cross-generational
workforces. Although some of these traits might at first appear to be not applicable in the
military environment, a closer look will reveal that at least to a certain degree, they all can be
applied successfully.

Accommodate employee differences. With attrition being at the top of business leaders
agendas also, businesses have gone to great lengths to create a "friendlier workplace."
Realizing that the military can only do so much, this trait may seem difficult to implement. The
military, however, already accommodates families with special needs through the Exceptional
Family Member Program. The services are also working harder with those families with high
school age children in an attempt to stabilize them. These are only two examples and more can
still be done at the unit level.

Create workplace choices. Although subordinates cannot have free reign over their
workplace, in some cases they can have input. In the business world this trait encompasses
everything from dress codes to minor rules and regulations. It is allowing the workforce to have
legitimate input into their work environment. In the military services, subordinates can have
input into things such as the design of the unit awards program, section organization, or
something as small as determining what to do for unit physical training. Of course, the
Commander always retains final approval authority on any changes.

Operate from a sophisticated management style. This is one trait that appears to be tailor
made for the military. Although Zemke, et al, talks about "managers," it is easy for the reader to

transpose leader instead. Zemke, et al, suggest that successful managers "operate with a certain finesse." They go on to say: "They tend to be more direct." And "...They give those who report to them the big picture, specific goals and measures, then they turn their people loose—giving them feedback, reward and recognition as appropriate."[58] Zemke, et al, lists seven attributes of this management style:

- Their supervisory style is not fixed.
- Their leadership style is situationally varied.
- They depend less on positional than on personal power.
- They know when and how to make personal policy exceptions, without causing a team riot.
- They are thoughtful when matching individuals to a team or a team or individual to an assignment.
- They balance concern for tasks and concern for people.
- They understand the elements of trust and work to gain it from their employees.

Respect competence and initiative. According to Zemke, et al, successful civilian companies never forget why they hired the best possible people—it is so they will do the best possible job.[59] In the military services, the recruiters work extremely hard to ensure that their respective service gets the best possible people also. However, once on active duty, it is easy for junior people to get lost in the crowd. Add to this the wide spread zero-defect mentality and it is easy to understand how the military can squelch initiative. This is a trait that must be taught and demonstrated by leaders at all levels, but especially senior leaders.

Nourish retention. Retention must be a priority for senior leaders all of the time, not just when headquarters tells them that there is a retention problem. In the early summer of 2000, the manpower planners for the Marine Corps announced that they might not achieve their planned end strength for FY00 by the end of September 2000. This was caused because fewer first term enlistees were reenlisting than were originally planned.[60] There were only two possible solutions to this problem. First, increase the mission of the recruiting command, or, increase the number of first term reenlistments. The recruiting mission was already high, so the Commandant of the Marine Corps chose to make retention a command emphasis at all levels. The command emphasis on retention worked. First term reenlistments went up and the Marine Corps achieved its end strength goals for FY00. This problem may not have even existed if retention had been a leadership priority in the beginning.

According to the CSIS study:

> Changes in military climate and culture, together with fundamental shifts in the geostrategic environment, changes in technology and *demographics*, and economic growth will challenge even the most competent and inspirational leader.[61] [emphasis added]

Peter Senge was very succinct when he said "The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization."[62] Climate surveys like the CSIS study suggest that the military is having difficulty tapping "people's commitment." Although there are many aspects to military culture and climate, significant changes to any of one of them can put significant pressure on the organization. Of all the aspects, the military has the hardest time handling change in demographics. The five ACORN imperatives go a long way in successfully managing the *demographic* part of this challenge.

MILITARY CLIMATE AND CULTURE SURVEY; A GENERATIONAL EXPLANATION

Evaluating the nine findings of the CSIS Military Climate and Culture Survey (MCCS) against the generations currently serving on active duty, the reader will find that six are applicable here: fundamental professional values, morale and readiness, strong local leadership, conflicting values, gender and race issues, and quality of life.

Fundamental Professional Values

As the study made clear, the military must "...foster certain foundational values and traditions that differ from those of civilian society."[63] But there is a concern among military observers that the military is shifting from an institutional organization (motivation from a sense of service) to a more occupational organization (motivation from the market place).[64] Moskos, et al, goes into great detail on this subject. They refer to it as the "I/O Theory."[65] They discuss several trends, some of which were confirmed in the CSIS study (such as more junior military members being married with families and more military service members living off base), that suggest the military is slowly transitioning into more of an occupational organization. Implied in this theory is that the military may be slowly losing its professional values. The CSIS study, however, finds that "...military personnel today overwhelmingly subscribe to traditional military values such as self-sacrifice, discipline, and obedience to lawful authority." Interestingly, the study goes on to say:

> This commitment to a traditional military code and standards of excellence, however, does not translate automatically into high morale or satisfaction with military life. Instead, many service members are frustrated that circumstances in their units seem to preclude their achieving high standards of mission readiness. Morale and satisfaction with service have both suffered, and this has had a negative impact on military effectiveness.[66]

Xers are looking for family type relationships and the military has filled this need. However, some of their attributes, such as distrust of Boomers, unintimidated by authority, and their independent nature, have translated into serious frustrations on the job. The Xers are committed to traditional military values, but they are not committed to the Boomer's leadership. The Millennials, who will begin joining the officer corps in one to two years, will do substantially better with the Boomers in charge. However, their immediate supervisors will be the Xers and their cynical pessimism will cause another generation gap between themselves and the Millennials.

Morale and Readiness

In this finding, the MCCS study once again validated that personal commitment to standards of excellence does not automatically translate to high morale. Specifically, the study says:

> The leadership of the armed forces has not yet adjusted to the reality that there are insufficient operating resources and personnel to match missions. This raises the question of whether the allocation of resources, the number of missions, *the methods of leadership and management,* the military's traditional expectation for universal excellence, or some combination of these factors must change.[67] [emphasis added]

The problem does not lie in high optempo or readiness issues; these are only symptoms. The issue that causes low morale and high attrition is the Xers perceived breech of confidence by the Boomer leaders. Boomer leaders are consistently and publicly saying that there are enough resources to accomplish all assigned missions. This is not what the Xers perceive as the truth. In reality, DOD has reduced its structure by 36 percent and cut spending by 40 percent from its Cold War peak, while requiring the military to deploy three to four times more frequently than during the cold war.[68] It is the Xers (and junior Boomers) that are feeling the brunt of this Boomer generated high optempo and perstempo. The Xers see the Boomers as the ones who continue to commit to force reductions while also committing to an increase in operations, thus increasing the perstempo. Xers, already cynical and distrusting of Boomers, consider this a severe breech of loyalty. The CSIS study specifically states that there is a "...declining trust and confidence in the institution and its leaders."[69] As confirmed in the first finding, service members are drawn to the professional values and standards of excellence expressed by the military. However, the disconnect between what the Boomer leaders are saying and doing, and what the Xers are experiencing is causing serious morale and retention problems.

To understand just how serious this problem really is, all one has to do is spend a few hours with any of the seminars in the Army War College Class of 2002 (next year's class will

probably be the same). Although made up of mostly junior Boomers with a few senior Xers, the majority complain about this very disconnect between senior leadership and the operating forces (battalion level and lower). These are the officers who just left battalion command, having personally experienced these problems.

Strong Local Leadership

The CSIS study validated what the military has known and believed in for hundreds of years. Strong leadership "makes a significant difference."[70] The problem comes in defining strong leadership. The Boomers define strong leadership as being more dictatorial and directive in nature, with close supervision. This contradicts what motivates the Xers. This is not to say that Boomers must coddle or placate the Xers. What it does mean, however, is that the Boomers *must* understand how their leadership style effects those they are trying to lead—Xers. Xers typically equate close supervision with micromanagement. Although they understand and accept the hierarchical nature of the military, they have trouble understanding the intensity with which the Boomers lead. While the Boomer leadership style does not sit well with Xers, the Boomers will find a refreshing change with the Millennials, who like structure and supervision.

The CSIS study also states "Strong local leadership ... is essential for maintaining the vibrant organizational climates essential for operational effectiveness in the twenty-first century." It goes on to say "Present leader development and promotion systems, however, are not up to the task of consistently identifying and advancing highly competent leaders."[71] This is an important finding that has received a lot of review. Unfortunately, according to the CSIS study, "...they do not seem to be backed by the type of institutional momentum necessary to force significant change in this sensitive area."[72] According to Harold Geneen, CEO for ITT from 1958 to 1979, "...management is something objective: ...and your performance can be measured."[73] Leadership, he says "... is purely subjective, difficult to define, virtually impossible to measure, and cannot be taught in school, any more than a baseball player can learn to throw a curve ball by reading a manual."[74] The Xers see the problem here very clearly. The Boomer leadership says they are looking for leaders, but the evaluation system rewards managers.

Conflicting Values

This finding is also closely related to the first three. The study found that with the military's can-do attitude, senior leadership is reluctant to turn down new missions. In fact, it causes them "...to take on an excessive number of missions and other projects."[75] According to the study, this has specifically lead the rank and file to express "...disappointment in their senior service leaders."[76] As mentioned above, the Xers relate to this as a breech of trust and honesty

that they expect from their senior leaders. At the root of this, is the Xers belief that the senior leadership is ignoring their input, after they have requested it.

Gender and Race Issues

This is an issue for the Boomer leadership more than the Xer rank and file. Howe and Strauss showed that the Xers are less racist and sexist than any elder generation.[77] And the CSIS study seems to substantiate this. Seventy-one percent of the respondents indicated a "general agreement" that their units did not have racial discrimination problems. Also noted by the study, however, "...36 percent of minority personnel did believe there were some sort of racial problems in their unit."[78] This is an issue that should improve as the Xers begin to fill senior leadership positions and the Millennials begin to enter the officer ranks. The Millennials, also ethnically diverse, outpace the Xers' diversity. Twenty percent of the Millennials are second generation American and 35 percent of all Millennials are nonwhite (16% Latino; 14% Black; 5% other).[79]

Quality of Life

This issue is directly related to the Xers belief that the Boomers have breeched the special trust that they believed existed between them and the Boomer leadership. As stated earlier, the Xer generation is the first generation in history that will not exceed their parents' standard of living.[80] Couple this with their desire to strengthen their family ties, they take their personal time and the standard of living for their immediate family very seriously.[81] When Xers are done for the day, they want to be left alone. According to Howe and Struass it is "A place where they can avoid worldly realities, be themselves, and enjoy a little un-hung-up fun."[82] One way to frustrate this generation is to ask them to participate in "mandatory" fun thought up by Boomer leaders. An active duty, single, E-4 in the Marine Corps, recently lamented how he, and other single Marines, were required to attend a unit family day specifically tailored to married Marines and their families.[83] Activities like this, although common, only aggravate the problem.

Family support activities, such as childcare, housing, and medical benefits are also a problem. Although improvements are being made, the CSIS study showed that the efforts have fallen "significantly short."[84] According to the authors of the study, pay and overall standard of living statements received the most negative responses.[85] This is a direct reflection of the Xers intent to put family first.

RECOMMENDATIONS

> Leadership is a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow. Any discussion of leadership must attend to the dynamics of this relationship. Strategies, tactics, skills, and practices are empty

unless we understand the fundamental human aspirations that connect leaders and their constituents.

—James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

So what are the answers? As stated earlier, there are no easy answers. However, there are some things that can, and should be done. As stated earlier, the attrition dilemma is deeply rooted in the human dimensions of interpersonal skills, organizational behavior, and generational peer types. Junior and mid-grade officers are experiencing a high level of frustration in their senior leaders, not the proverbial system. These officers understand that the system is the senior officer. If, as presented at the beginning of this paper, senior leaders are losing credibility in the eyes of their subordinates, there are specific steps the Services should take.

TANGIBLE BENEFITS

Although tangible benefits will not treat the underlying cause of attrition, it can, temporarily, reduce the exodus if implemented in a timely manner. It is not the intent, nor is it within the scope of this paper to provide a laundry list of technology, procedures, or systems to implement, tailored made for Xer officers. Although these can be important in temporarily stemming the flow of officer attrition, it does not go far enough to provide a sustainable solution. Multiple generations in the military will always be present. What will change, however, is which generation will be in the senior leadership role and which will be in the junior office role. Tangible benefits can be applied equally to any generational cohort with favorable, although temporary, results.

In his paper, <u>Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers In the Officer Corps</u>, Dr Leonard Wong goes into considerable detail in four areas: *Instill work/family/personal time balance, Appeal to the Xer desire for relationships, Rely less on traditional hierarchical leadership, and highlight technology.*[86] In each of these areas, Dr. Wong discusses specific steps unit leaders should undertake in an attempt to create an organization that is more conducive to the Xer personality. Although Boomers may not like the sound of this, it is a vitally important first step in at least temporarily reducing attrition when considering the fact that Xers make up the vast majority of both the Army and the Marine Corps. These steps are applicable and any senior officer seriously interested in addressing the attrition dilemma should read his paper.

LEADER CREDIBILITY

Senior leadership should examine the issue of their credibility with their subordinates. Credibility is the basis for effective leadership. The experts referenced in this paper substantiate the premise that Boomer leadership has lost credibility with Xer subordinates. Without proper institutionalized training, this is an issue that will continue between the Xers and Millennials. Without credibility, leaders must compel obedience; with credibility, obedience comes voluntarily. H. W. Crocker III wrote, "A true leader does not rely on force, but on the power of example."[87] And the confederate General, Robert E. Lee, once said "As a general principle you should not force young men to do their duty, but let them do it voluntarily and thereby develop their characters."[88]

So what gives a Leader credibility with his/her subordinates? James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner suggest "example-setting is essential to earning credibility."[89] In a study on credibility, Kouzes and Posner ask people how they would know if someone had credibility. The most frequent response was: "They do what they say they will do." and, "...above all else, people want leaders who are credible."[90] They go on to say:

> The truest test of credible leadership is what leaders pay attention to and what they do. Leaders are judged by how they spend their time, how they react to critical incidents, the stories they tell, the questions they ask, the language and symbols they choose, and the measures they use.[91]

In two separate surveys, in 1987 and 1993, the top four characteristics of admired leaders remained the same. These top characteristics are honesty, forward-looking, inspirational, and competency. Communications researchers call these attributes "source credibility." Those who rate high in these are considered to be credible sources of information.[92]

EDUCATION

More leadership education should be implemented in the service's Command and Staff Colleges and War Colleges. This leadership education should include many more hours of interpersonal relationship skills, management skills and techniques such as the ACORN imperatives, and the generational impact on the workforce. Although tactics, techniques, and procedures are extremely critical to military effectiveness, leading and managing people effectively also requires many hours of education. As Table 5 indicates, the Army and the Marine Corps currently spend very little time on the intricacies of interpersonal relationship skills or human relations skills.[93] It is interesting to note however, that the Marine Corps spends considerably less time on these skills than the Army. Specifically, the Services should develop courses that educate leaders on:

- The impact of their leadership style on their subordinates.
- The multi-generational impact on the workforce.
- Interpersonal relationship shills.
- Human relations.
- Listening.
- Civilian management practices.
- Leader credibility.
- Current military culture and climate trends.

As mentioned above, tangible benefits are an important ingredient in minimizing attrition. However, if the benefits are applied irregularly or without sufficient senior leader support, they could actually cause higher frustration and subsequently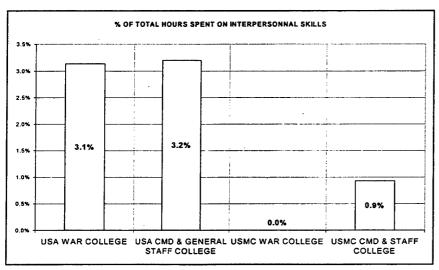 higher attrition. If tangible benefits are to work, then senior leaders must understand why they work. When they understand why they work, then they can be implemented properly and with better results. Leader education in the area listed above is the only answer that provides long-term solutions to the attrition dilemma.

% OF TOTAL HOURS SPENT ON INTERPERSONNAL SKILLS

USA WAR COLLEGE: 3.1%
USA CMD & GENERAL STAFF COLLEGE: 3.2%
USMC WAR COLLEGE: 0.0%
USMC CMD & STAFF COLLEGE: 0.9%

TABLE 5: % OF USMC/ARMY CGSC & WAR COLLEGE CURRICULUM SPENT ON HUMAN RELATIONS OR INTERPERSONNAL RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Understanding the intricacies of human interaction is the only way to compensate for the ever-changing workforce. As the Boomers continue to reach retirement age, the Xers fill their vacancies. As the Xers begin to fill senior leadership ranks (Lieutenant Colonel and above), Millennials will soon begin filling the junior officer ranks. If the Services only implement tangible benefits and procedures now that are tailored for Xers, the Xers will be facing the same attrition dilemma with Millennials when they become the senior leaders. *Any attempt to implement processes or procedures to reduce attrition without the formal education of our leaders at the rank of Major and above, will only result in a temporary reduction of attrition and another attrition crises in the relatively short future.*

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CONCLUSIONS

There will always be multiple generations in the military at one time. This will continue to

COHORT CHARACTERISTICS			
	BOOMERS	**X'ERS**	**NEXTERS**
Defining Events and Trends	Prosperity, children in the spotlight, television, suburbia, assassinations, Vietnam, civil rights movement, cold war, women's lib, space race	Watergate, stagflation, latchkey kids, single parents, MTV, AIDS, computers, Challenger explosion, fall of Berlin Wall, Glasnost, Wall Street frenzy	Computers, school violence, Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine high school shooting, TV talk shows, it takes a village, multiculturalism, girl's movement, McGwire and Sosa, World Trade Center attacks, busy & over-planned lives, Clinton sex scandal
Core Values	Optimism, team orientation, personal gratification, health and wellness, personal growth, youth, work, involvement	Diversity, thinking globally, balance, technoliteracy, fun, informality, self-reliance, pragmatism	Confidence, civic duty, achievement, sociability, morality, diversity, street smarts
Generational Personality	Driven, soul searchers. They are willing to go the extra mile. They have a love/hate relationship with financial prosperity.	Self-reliant, risk takers, skeptical. They seek balance and sense of family. They think about the job, not the work hours.	Optimistic about the future, realistic about the present, prefer collective action and team oriented, tenacious
ON THE JOB			
	BOOMERS	**X'ERS**	**NEXTERS**
Assets	Service oriented, driven, willing to go extra mile, good at relationships, want to please, good team players	Adaptable, technoliterate, independent, unintimidated by authority, creative	Collective action, team oriented, optimism, tenacity, heroic spirit, multitasking capabilities, technological savvy
Liabilities	Not naturally "budget minded," uncomfortable with conflict, reluctant to go against peers, May put process ahead of result, overly sensitive to feedback, judgmental of those who see things differently, self-centered.	Impatient, poor people skills, inexperienced, cynical	Need for supervision and structure, inexperience, particularly with handling difficult people'issues
Messages That Motivate	• "You're important to our success" • "You're valued here." • "Your contribution is unique and important." • "We need you." • "I approve of you." • "You're worthy."	• "Do it your way." • "We've got the newest hardware and software." • "There aren't a lot of rules here." • "We're not very corporate."	• "You'll be working with other bright, creative people." • "Your boss is in his (or her) sixties." • "You and your coworkers can help turn this company around." • "You can be a hero here."

TABLE 6: BOOMER, XER, & MILLENIAL TRAITS COMPARISON

cause serious frustration both for the senior leadership and their subordinates. Even as the

Xers begin to take over from their Boomer leaders, the Millennials will begin filling the ranks as

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junior officers. Implementing processes and procedures in an attempt to reduce attrition without increasing officer education will only lead to short-term successes and future attrition dilemmas. The generation gap the Services are currently experiencing and the resulting frustrations will only continue between the Xers and Millennials. The Service leadership can minimize this impact by substantially increasing the number of hours spent on this subject in their service schools. Increasing this type of education, to include the negative impact of cross-generational conflict and ways to reduce it, will assist greatly in reducing their frustration. Table 6 amplifies some of the generational differences that cause generational conflict in the workplace.[94]

Long-term solutions to the attrition dilemma will also require serious self-evaluation by senior leaders. It is imperative for the senior leadership to restore their credibility. Leaders can command obedience, but they cannot command respect. They must earn that. As Colonel Thomas W. Weafer said in the conclusion to his Strategic Research Project: "In the final analysis, these recommendations are all about leadership and trust. ... the Army [this can apply to the other Services as well] must begin to institutionally 'walk the walk' if it is to retain the trust of its young officers..."[95] Dr. Paul Hersey summed it up very well in his definition of leadership style as "...how the leader appears *in the eyes of the beholder.* It's not how people see themselves that matters, but how they come across to others they're attempting to influence."[96] Does the senior leadership really understand how they appear in the eyes of their subordinates?

WORD COUNT: 9244

ENDNOTES

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[2] Charles C. Moskos and Frank R. Wood, <u>The Military: More Than Just a Job</u> (McLean, VA.: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1988) Chapter II

[3] Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <u>American Culture in the Twenty-First Century</u> (Washington, D.C., The CSID Press, February 2000), 17-35

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[5] Ibid, 29

[6] Marine Corps Active Duty Personnel Transaction File (November 2001) at Defense Manpower Data Center, Seaside, CA

[7] Leonard Wong, <u>Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers In the Officer Corps</u> (U.S. Army War College, October 2000) 9

[8] Marine Corps manpower data from the Defense Manpower Data Center for fiscal years 1972 through 1995.

[9] Ibid

[10] William Strauss and Neil Howe, <u>Generations: The History of America's Future 1584 to 2069</u> (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991) figure 6-6. There are actually six living generations. The oldest, people from the Lost Generation, would be over 100 years old now. Their population, however, is small and has no real impact on the subject of this paper.

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[19] Ibid

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[32] Ibid, 110

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[37] Ron Zemke, Clair Raines, & Bob Filipczak, Generations At Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace (New York: AMACOM, 2000), 102 & 120

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[58] Ibid, 157

[59] Ibid, 158

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[82] Ibid, 204

[83] The E-4 mentioned here is the authors' son. He is currently a Corporal in the Marine Corps stationed at Camp Pendleton, California.

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[93] Total hours for each service school were acquired from each service school directly. The determination on what course qualifies as a human relations course or interpersonal relationship course was determined by the author. This was done after reviewing course descriptions or speaking with school representatives. In order to avoid complaints of being overly conservative in identification of appropriate courses, the author was very liberal in the application of what he considered interpersonal relationship skills or human relations training.

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